

[By Daniel Barlow, Barre Montpelier Times Argus](#)

MONTPELIER – U.S. Rep. Peter Welch urged President Obama this week not to send more troops to Afghanistan, saying that the eight-year battle there threatens to become another military quagmire.

Welch, who voted against sending more U.S. troops to the country earlier this year, said that the terrorist organization that carried out the 9/11 attacks is still a serious threat, but that the group is dispersed throughout several countries.

"Al Qaida will go where it is safe for them to operate and right now that is in the countries bordering Afghanistan," Welch said during a telephone interview Monday. "They are still a serious threat, but they are one that is decentralized and spread around several locations."

Welch said that means the mission needs to shift away from a prolonged counterinsurgency war in the country to using military intelligence and strategic strikes to stop al Qaida from planning and carrying out future attacks.

"We went into Afghanistan to stop them from attacking the United States again," said Welch, who supported the late 2001 invasion. "I think we've accomplished that goal and now our troops are an occupying force charged with nation-building in a vast and varied country."

The comments from Vermont's Democratic congressman comes at a time when the White House is considering a change in strategy for the war after sending thousands of more troops there this year. About 1,400 Vermont National Guard soldiers are expecting to be deployed to the country later this year, and there is considerable uncertainty about what their mission will be.

This year has already become the deadliest for U.S. troops since the invasion in 2001. More than 700 troops have been killed in the war so far, with 51 confirmed dead in battles in August

alone.

The Obama administration is now considering a new shift in strategies for Afghanistan, with some in the Pentagon calling for another surge in troops there and some members of Congress saying they are reluctant to see more troops sent there without a clear exit plan.

Welch said there are several factors that contribute to his position, including the escalating cost of the war (the U.S. is budgeted to spend \$173 billion there in 2009 for a total of \$439 billion since the start of the war) and opinion polls in both countries showing decreased support for increasing the troop presence.

"Only 18 percent of the country wants us to be there," Welch said, citing an ABC/BBC poll taken in February.

Welch said he also has serious concerns about the validity of the recent Afghani election. President Hamid Karzai was announced as the winner of that vote, but independent election observers – and that country's Electoral Complaints Commission – report vast accounts of voter fraud and intimidation.

Afghanistan is infected with widespread corruption at nearly all levels of government, Welch said. During one of his two visits to the country since his election to the office in 2006, Welch said he spoke with a trucker who often needs to pay off dozens of officials as he drives across the country.

Welch said the situation in Afghanistan might be far different today if the Bush administration had not shifted gears in late 2002 and early 2003 to invade Iraq.

At the time, government officials said Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and helped plan the 9/11 attacks. Both accusations proved not to be true.

"There is no doubt that Afghanistan would be better off today if President Bush had not taken his eye off the ball," Welch said.

U.S. Sen. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., has also called on Obama not to send more troops to Afghanistan. He said earlier this month that the war has become a quagmire without any clear exit strategy for the United States.